

# AMERICA MADE IN VIRGINIA

**freed·om** \fri-'d-əm\ *n* : the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action; liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another; **in·de·pen·dence** \in-de-pen-dent\ *n* : **RELEASE** (freedom from care) **ease**, **FACILITY** (freedom of movement) **e** : the quality of being outspoken or unrestricted (he had the freedom of the yard) **2** : **lib·er·ty** **lib·er·ty** *n* : one guaranteed by fundamental law  
• **syn** **FREE·dom**, **LIB·er·ty**; **in·de·pen·dence** mean the power or condition of acting without compulsion. **FREE·dom** has a broad range of application from total absence of restraints to merely a sense of not being unduly hampered or frustrated; **LIB·er·ty** suggests release from former restraint or compulsion; **in·de·pen·dence** implies freedom specially granted or conceded and may connote abuse of freedom  
**freed·om·wom·an** \fri-'d-əm-'wim·ən\ *n* : a woman freed of private business

2025 STUDENT COMPETITION:  
*EXPRESSIONS OF FREEDOM*

VA★250

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	4
---------------------	---

<i>Preserving the Legacy</i>	5
------------------------------	---

<i>Award Categories</i>	5
-------------------------	---

## Submission Winners

<b>Keegan B.</b> // Grade 11 // Region 7 Finalist	6
---	---

<b>Cierra C.</b> // Grade 10 // Region 8 Finalist	8
---	---

<b>Sierra D.</b> // Grade 7 // Region 5 Finalist	10
--	----

<b>Skyla G.</b> // Grade 8 // Region 1 Finalist	12
---	----

<b>Achsa H.</b> // Grade 6 // Region 4 Finalist	14
---	----

<b>Bria H.</b> // Grade 5 // Honorable Mention - Elementary School	16
--	----

<b>Aggie J.</b> // Grade 4 // Honorable Mention - Elementary School	18
---	----

<b>Sarah L.</b> // Grade 11 // Honorable Mention - High School	20
--	----

<b>Malak M.</b> // Grade 11 // Honorable Mention - High School	24
--	----

<b>Molly M.</b> // Grade 3 // Honorable Mention - Elementary School	28
---	----

<b>Daniel N.</b> // Grade 11 // Region 2 Finalist	29
---	----

<b>Mara O.</b> // Grade 4 // Top Honors - Elementary School ★	32
---	----

<b>Avelia P.</b> // Grade 7 // Region 3 Finalist	33
--	----

<b>Shaneeeka S.</b> // Grade 11 // Region 6 Finalist	34
--	----

<b>Connor S.</b> // Grade 11 // Top Honors - High School ★	38
--	----

<b>Josh S.</b> // Grade 12 // Honorable Mention - High School	41
---	----

<b>Kate S.</b> // Grade 7 // Honorable Mention - Middle School	43
--	----

<b>Joanna Z.</b> // Grade 8 // Top Honors - Middle School ★	44
---	----



# INTRODUCTION

As Virginia prepares to mark the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026, VA250 is proud to celebrate the Commonwealth's foundational role in shaping the nation. From the first English settlement at Jamestown to the surrender at Yorktown, from the voices of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson to those of Powhatan, Pocahontas, James Armistead Lafayette, and Gowan Pamphlet—**America. Made in Virginia.**

The Expressions of Freedom contest was created in partnership with the Office of the Governor, Virginia Department of Education, and the VA250 Commission to engage students in this historic moment and to explore the enduring meaning of freedom. Grounded in the principles of the Declaration of Independence, students were invited to reflect on a simple yet powerful question: *What does freedom mean to you?*

The responses were as diverse as Virginia itself. This collection of student work showcases powerful expressions of identity, hope, and civic purpose. Each submission reflects a personal and evolving understanding of freedom, shaped by the past and imagined for the future.

VA250's theme **"To Form a More Perfect Union"** recognizes that the work begun 250 years ago is not finished. Through education, engagement, and inspiration, we aim to tell a more complete story of our nation's founding and its ongoing journey. The Expressions of Freedom competition encourages all students to participate in commemorating the ideas and struggles that continue to shape America today.

We invite you to explore these pages and be inspired by the voices of Virginia's youth—voices that remind us not only of where we come from, but also of the future we are building together.



The Honorable Terry L. Austin  
Chair, VA250 Commission



The Honorable Mamie E. Locke  
Vice Chair, VA250 Commission

## PRESERVING THE LEGACY

The top entries of the 2025 Expressions of Freedom competition, showcased in this booklet, will have their work placed in a time capsule that is destined for the restored pedestal of the iconic George Washington statue in Trafalgar Square, London. An exact replica of the Houdon statue of Washington is located in the rotunda of the Virginia State Capitol. The London time capsule is set to be opened in 250 years, creating a lasting link between Virginia's students today and future generations.

The Friends of the Washington Statue, a historic preservation not-for-profit, has worked to restore the iconic landmark image of Washington, honoring the ties between the United States and the United Kingdom with rededication ceremonies and celebratory events in London on June 18, 2025 in the anticipation of the 250th anniversary of American Independence. On May 12, soil was collected at Mount Vernon, to be added to the London statue during the June 18 ceremony.

## AWARD CATEGORIES

Expressions of Freedom entries were thoughtfully reviewed and evaluated by a distinguished panel of judges who considered the clarity of ideas, student voice, and presentation. From each of the Virginia Department of Education Superintendent's Regions, one outstanding entry was selected as a Regional Finalist. Additionally, one exceptional work from each educational level—Elementary, Middle, and High School—was honored with the distinction of Top Honors.

In celebration of the creativity, insight, and passion demonstrated by so many students, a number of additional entries were awarded Honorable Mention and proudly included in this booklet as a tribute to the powerful voices and perspectives of young artists and writers.





**KEEGAN B.**  
Region 7 Finalist

Title of Work: *Definition of Freedom*  
Grade 11 // Richlands High School, Tazewell County

## Artist Statement

My name is Keegan Brown, and I am an Art 4 student in high school as well as the vice president of our Art Club. I have been taking art classes since elementary school, and I have always enjoyed expressing myself and my feelings through art.

When I think of freedom, I envision red, white, and blue, the stars and stripes, and the Statue of Liberty standing tall on Ellis Island. In my illustration, I aimed to convey how freedom truly feels to me. I hope that others can also sense the same feeling of freedom and pride from this piece. I used three types of mediums for the artwork: colored pencil, ink, and a white paint pen. The paper itself is a 7x10 mixed media page, and I incorporated torn pages from a Webster's Dictionary for definitions and from a book of older folk songs related to freedom.

I want to express my gratitude to my APUSH teacher, Amanda Queen, and my Art 4 teacher, Rebekah Vandyke, for encouraging me to enter this contest and for providing feedback on my submission.



## Oh Freedom, You Set Us Free

Freedom, oh freedom, what a wonderful thing,  
The joy that a small bird feels when it takes wing.

The way a frown can turn into a smile,  
The peace that spreads for miles and miles.

I often think of freedom as a treasured word,  
A shining light when all seems blurred.  
Though darkness may be all around,  
Hope in freedom can still be found.

The Statue of Liberty stands so tall,  
A beacon of strength that won't let us fall.  
She holds her torch so proud and free,  
A lasting light for you and me.

Freedom is the bird up in the sky,  
Soaring fearless, strong, and high.  
It's like a poem that finds its grace,  
With wings of truth in every place.

Freedom, oh freedom, what a glorious sound,  
A force that lifts us from the ground.  
Though fear may try to hold us near,  
Freedom is stronger and wipes the tears.

I love the way that freedom rings,  
A song of joy that gently clings.  
It's every soul's most heartfelt plea,  
Freedom, oh freedom, you set us free.

**CIERRA C.**

*Region 8 Finalist*

Grade 10 // Halifax County High School, Halifax County

## Expressions of Freedom

When I think about freedom, my mind associates it with being able to speak my mind, make my own choices, and be treated fairly no matter who I am. America was founded on this idea that every person should be free—that we would be a country of, by, and for the people. But this freedom has not always meant the same thing for everyone.

Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, and stated that, “all men are created equal.” However, centuries of struggles have passed to realize the promise of that statement. After the Civil War, slavery was emancipated, but segregation and Jim Crow laws kept African Americans from having true equality. And it was almost 100 years later before the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

One of the first places to implement the *Brown* decision was right here in my hometown of Harrisonburg, Virginia. In 1956, Judge John Paul issued the first court order to implement that decision for the state of Virginia from the federal courthouse on Main Street in Harrisonburg. That was almost 70 years ago, but almost no one knows about it within the community, and it kind of feels like a hidden history. I have learned about this story because two high school students from my community made a film about it and applied for a historic marker to be installed at the courthouse. Their marker will be displayed this coming May, and it will teach the community about the inspiring stories that were taken with such resilience and determination.

To me, this story shows how long the fight for true freedom and equality can take. Change is very slow and gradual, but it’s important for citizens to make their voices heard and help change people’s minds. It has taken decades

for people in our town to embrace the idea that Judge Paul’s ruling was important, and that it mattered for everyone’s freedom. That shows

that while we have come a long way in ending school segregation, we still have a long way to go in teaching everyone about why that is important.

Freedom isn’t just a word in a history textbook or something we celebrate once a year on July 4th, it’s something we all have to keep working toward as a country every day. It means standing up for what is right, treating other people with respect, and celebrating our strengths as a country as well as recognizing the difficult chapters of our past.

So when I hear the word “freedom,” I just don’t think about the past—I think about the future. I am proud that our town is finally recognizing its role in civil rights history. I hope we can keep moving forward and work toward the words that Thomas Jefferson wrote 250 years ago. Similar to him, we still fall short of that idea, but the story of American freedom is the journey toward that vision of the future.

**SIERRA D.**

*Region 5 Finalist*

Grade 7 // Montevideo Middle School, Rockingham County



## What is Freedom to Me?

Freedom is the air we breathe,  
A voice that never has to grieve.  
It is the right to speak the truth we hold,  
And let our spirit be bold.

Freedom is a chance to be,  
To show the world the real “us.”  
No masks, No walls, No false disguise,  
Just honest hearts and open eyes of the people, we are and will be.

To have the courage to stand our ground,  
To speak what’s real, no fear around.  
To speak our thoughts with no regrets,  
And to find our voices in the moments set.

Freedom is walking without shame,  
Living without hiding our names.  
Its lifting others when they fall,  
And daring to dream right past any wall.

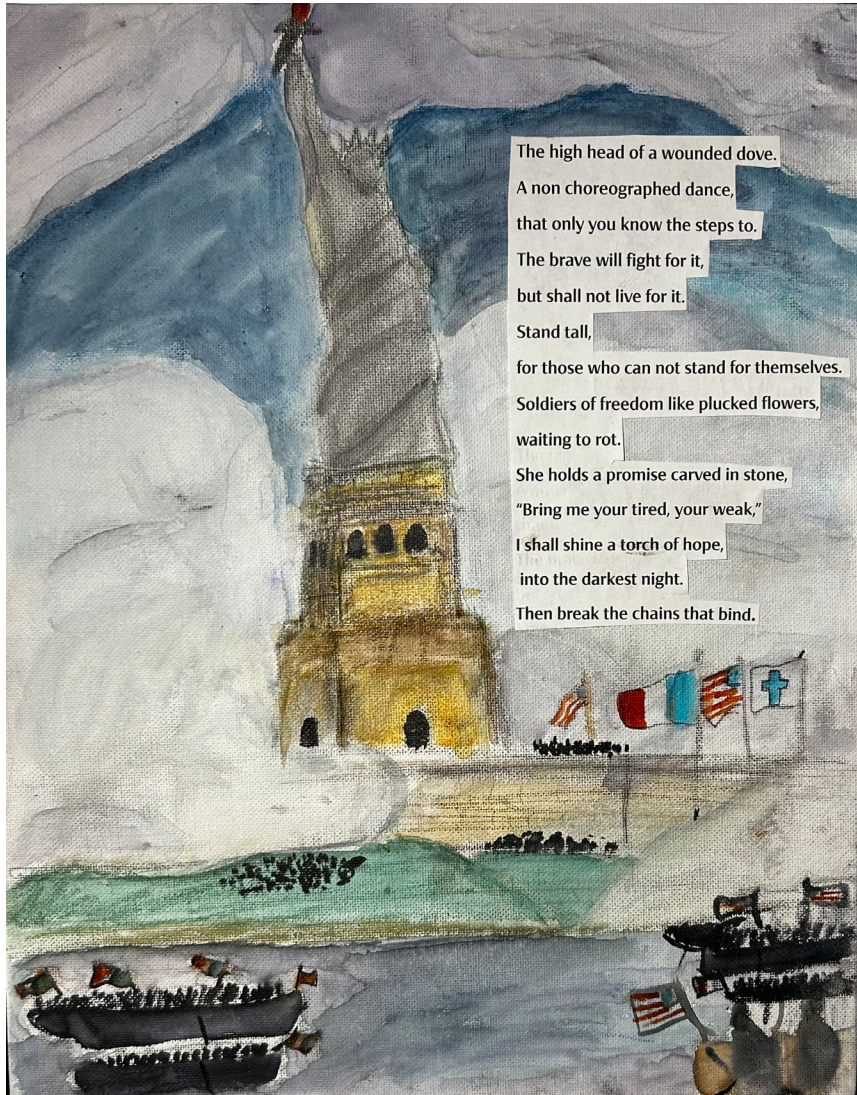
It’s not just for one to feel, but for all to feel,  
The power of choice, the right to heal.  
It’s being able to march hand in hand through the storms,  
And finding peace beyond the normal.

To Me, Freedom is more than just a word,  
Every silent cry was finally heard.  
It’s waking up and knowing you’re free,  
To live, To love, To simply be you.

**SKYLA G.**

*Region 1 Finalist*

Grade 8 // Luther Porter Jackson Middle School, Surry County



**ACHSAH H.**  
*Region 4 Finalist*

Title of Work: *The Manifestation of Freedom*  
 Grade 6 // Rippon Middle School, Prince William County

### Artist Statement

The painting shows the celebration between France and America at the unveiling of The Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty is a great sign of friendship, freedom, and peace. She serves as the center of the painting, with everything revolving around her. She holds her torch high parting the gloomy clouds, bringing light. Next to her is a short poem that reads:

"The high head of a wounded dove," A dove represents freedom, and the wound representing those who want to take that freedom away from him, yet the dove still holds his head high in resilience and hope.

"A non-choreographed dance, that only you know the steps to." This line explains that you can only choose your future. You never know what will happen next. It's only you who can create the dance or shape the future.

"The brave will fight for it but shall not live for it." This line references all the people of the past who have fought for freedom. Everyone who has died in battle for the freedom of their future generations.

"Stand tall, for those who cannot stand for themselves." A reference to Malala Yousafzai's quote, "I raise up my voice—not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard." Those who do not have the position, privilege or opportunities you have, stand up for their freedom and their thoughts. Raise your voice for those who have been silenced. Keep on pursuing because you deserve better, because they do.

"Soldiers of freedom like plucked flowers, waiting to rot." Soldiers killed and left on a battlefield. Not even being able to have their own bodies retrieved. Their families are only left to wonder if they are still alive and well. Soldiers can only lay on land they fought for and wither away like a flower.

"She holds a promise carved in stone, 'Bring me your tired, your weak,'" The statue of liberty has a tablet in her right hand that states "Bring me your tired and your weak." She comes with open arms to those who dream of a better tomorrow.

"I shall shine a torch of hope into the darkest night." The torch represents hope you have even through the struggling nights. The days you lay awake in bed unable to sleep, the simple thought of hope can push you to the end of a road of hesitation and fear.

"Then break the chains that bind." This quote means breaking what is holding you back from being free; from being where you want to be in life."





**BRIA H.**

*Honorable Mention - Elementary School*

Title of Work: *Freedom to Serve*

Grade 5 // Churchland Academy Elementary, Portsmouth

### Artist Statement

This artwork serves as both a tribute and an exploration—a reflection on the lessons my father imparted, both spoken and unspoken, and how those lessons continue to guide me. It speaks to the enduring impact a father has on shaping one's sense of self and the way we view the world, even when they are not physically present.

My father is currently serving in the US Navy. In creating this work, I aim to honor my father not only as a figure of authority but as a person with his own struggles, triumphs, and humanity. This piece invites the viewer to reflect on their own relationships, asking how the figure of a father shapes the course of a life. My Father is my hero and the inspiration behind this piece.


**AGGIE J.**

*Honorable Mention - Elementary School*

Title of Work: *As Free as an Eagle*

Grade 4 // Cave Spring Elementary, Roanoke County

**Artist Statement**

You can classify people into two categories. Dedaluses and Icaruses. We can be like Dedalus and achieve more in our life. Or be like Icarus and because of thoughtlessness become addicted that makes them lose some of their Freedom. We have to use our freedom wisely like Dedalus did.

“Then break the chains that bind.” This quote means breaking what is holding you back from being free; from being where you want to be in life.”



## What Does Freedom Mean to Me?

The first time I truly understood freedom, I stood in my grandmother's kitchen listening to her stories about growing up in Korea. Her weathered hands trembled as she described life under authoritarian rule—speaking in whispers, dreams shattered before they could take flight. “자유 — freedom,” she whispered, “isn't just characters in a textbook. It's the breath in your lungs when you can finally speak without looking over your shoulder.”

Steam rose from the pot of doenjang-jjigae as she pressed a warm dumpling into my palm. “Freedom is something your grandfather and I felt in our bones when we first stepped onto American soil—something we crossed oceans to claim for you.”

Freedom, to me, exists in three dimensions: the freedom to be, the freedom to become, and the freedom to belong.

The freedom to be is the right to exist authentically. I remember hiding my banchan lunch in middle school, practicing English pronunciation until my tongue bled, desperate to erase any trace of difference. Freedom revealed itself slowly as I learned that authenticity isn't weakness but power. Now when classmates gather and my mother teaches them to make kimbap, when my father's broken English tells stories that make everyone laugh, I recognize that freedom isn't erasing difference—it's transforming it into connection.

The freedom to become—the opportunity to reinvent without barriers—runs through my family like lifeblood. My parents arrived in Virginia during a bitter January, my mother six months pregnant, their lives packed into two weathered suitcases. “We had nothing but this wild American belief that tomorrow could be better than today,” my father once told me, his eyes fixed on something distant.

I witness this freedom most vividly in my parents' tailor and shoe repair shop—a small storefront with their name hand-painted on the window. Here, amid the hum of sewing machines and scent of leather, they've built not just a business but a testament to possibility. My father works with reverence—his fingers dancing across worn leather, breathing new life into what others discard. My mother's needle weaves through fabric with precision born from thousands of hours of practice.

“In Korea,” my father explained while resoling boots, “a cobbler's son remained a cobbler, bound by tradition.” He held up the restored boot. “Here, we repair shoes so you can walk paths we never could—choose directions we never imagined.”

Every morning at 5 AM, my parents unlock the shop door. They've never missed a day—not through illness, not even when xenophobic graffiti marred our storefront after 9/11. When I asked why they didn't take a day off after that violation, my mother said, “Freedom isn't just what you claim in good times—it's what you defend in difficult ones.”

The freedom to belong completes this trinity—the right to participate fully in civic life. This dimension pulses through me when I recall my mother studying citizenship questions night after night. “Why does this matter so much?” I asked. She looked up, expression fierce. “Because in Korea, I watched men dragged away for questioning the government. Because having a voice matters, and I will not waste mine.”

Last year, I walked with my parents to their polling station for their first presidential election as citizens. My mother wore her finest hanbok, traditional Korean clothing reserved for sacred celebrations. When they

emerged, American flags stickered to their lapels, my father's eyes shone with tears. That moment crystallized freedom's deepest meaning—not just rights granted but identity claimed.

My grandmother tells me of arriving in Virginia in the 1970s, of being told to “go back where you came from” while standing on soil she had legal right to occupy. “Freedom isn’t finished,” she reminds me. “Each generation must water it with their sweat and sometimes their tears.”

During COVID-19, when their shop was deemed “non-essential,” my parents transformed our garage into an emergency repair center. Healthcare workers dropped off uniforms needing alterations between shifts. Essential workers brought their only pair of work shoes, desperately needing repair. My parents worked through nights, refusing payment from those in need. “In times of crisis,” my mother explained, threading her needle by flashlight, “freedom means using your skills to lighten others’ burdens.”

When our community faced anti-Asian hatred during the pandemic, I helped organize a unity rally. My father stood before the crowd, still in his work apron, holding up combat boots he had resoled countless times. “These belong to a Marine who served in Afghanistan,” he said, his accented English carrying across the hushed crowd. “I repair his boots so he can continue standing for all of us. Freedom isn’t just what we receive—it’s what we maintain for each other.”

As America celebrates its 250th anniversary, my family’s journey testifies to freedom’s enduring power. Their courage to leave everything familiar, to persist despite suspicion—these actions honor the revolutionary spirit that birthed this nation. When my grandfather recites the oath of citizenship, his voice still carrying the cadence of Korean, I hear liberty’s promise: that here, we might become more fully ourselves while contributing to something greater.

Freedom isn’t static but a living covenant—continuously claimed through participation and perseverance. It pulses in my grandmother’s kitchen and my parents’ shop, in ballot boxes and community gatherings, in the space between heritage preserved and future imagined.

**SARAH L.**

*Honorable Mention - High School*

Grade 11 // Chantilly High School, Fairfax County



## What Does Freedom Mean to Me?

Freedom, to me, is more than a word; it is an opportunity, a responsibility, and a source of empowerment. It is the ability to live authentically, embrace one's identity, and pursue dreams without fear of judgment or restraint. As a hijabi girl born in Yemen, raised in the vibrant streets of New York City, and now residing in Virginia, my understanding of freedom is deeply shaped by my personal journey and the intersection of my faith, culture, and experiences in America. It represents the courage to honor my values, the resilience to overcome challenges, and the hope for a future where diversity is celebrated and inclusivity is the norm.

I came to America at just three months old, and as I grew up, my family and I found joy in the simplest things. My parents and older sisters shared this appreciation, and together we blended into the community over the years. What stands out most about that time is the beautiful bonds we formed with those around us. We were loved and recognized by almost everyone, especially my father, whose presence created genuine connections with our neighbors and acquaintances. Those moments of togetherness and acceptance left a lasting impact on my perception of freedom—it was about belonging, being embraced for who we were, and having the chance to thrive as part of a larger community.

Wearing my hijab, a choice I made with pride and conviction, is one of the ways I express my identity and faith. My hijab symbolizes freedom—a testament to my right to make decisions about how I present myself to the world. Yet, this freedom did not come without its challenges. When I was younger, particularly in middle school, I often felt the sting of criticism from peers who viewed me differently because of my hijab. Their stares carried a weight that made me question whether I truly belonged.

But freedom also means finding strength in adversity. My sisters inspired me to embrace confidence and stand tall in the face of judgment. They reminded me that my choice to wear the hijab was a reflection of my inner strength and dedication to my beliefs. With their support, I learned to turn those critical gazes into opportunities to educate and connect with others. Today, I wear my hijab with unwavering pride, and I take joy in sharing my religion and culture with those who are curious and supportive. Freedom, for me, is the ability to transform moments of vulnerability into opportunities for growth and understanding.

Academically, my experiences have taught me the importance of freedom in shaping identity and fostering community. Through studying history, I've come to appreciate the struggles and triumphs of individuals who have fought for equality and justice in America. From the civil rights movement to the fight for women's suffrage, these lessons have highlighted the resilience and determination required to secure freedom for all. They have also inspired me to think critically about the ways in which freedom can be expanded and preserved. My education has shown me that freedom is not just a privilege to be enjoyed but a responsibility to be upheld and protected for future generations.

Looking ahead, freedom represents the possibilities of the future—a chance to dream boldly and work toward meaningful change. As a young Muslim woman, I aspire to create a modest clothing line that empowers women to embrace their faith and individuality. I want to be a voice within the Muslim women's community, advocating for inclusivity and representation. My vision is to challenge stereotypes and showcase that hijabi women are capable of achieving greatness in all areas of life. The hijab and modest dress are not limitations; they are symbols of strength, dedication, and pride.

Moreover, freedom means challenging misconceptions and fostering understanding. I hope to inspire people to see that hijabis are equally capable of excelling in academics, careers, and creative pursuits. Whether it's through my clothing line or my interactions with others, I want to encourage dialogue and break down barriers. Freedom is about creating spaces where everyone feels valued and supported, regardless of their background or beliefs.

America's achievements in promoting freedom remind us of the power of unity and resilience. The founding principles of liberty and equality have paved the way for progress and innovation. Yet, these achievements also serve as a call to action—to continue advocating for justice, inclusivity, and diversity. Freedom is not stagnant; it evolves with the efforts of those who dare to dream of a better future.

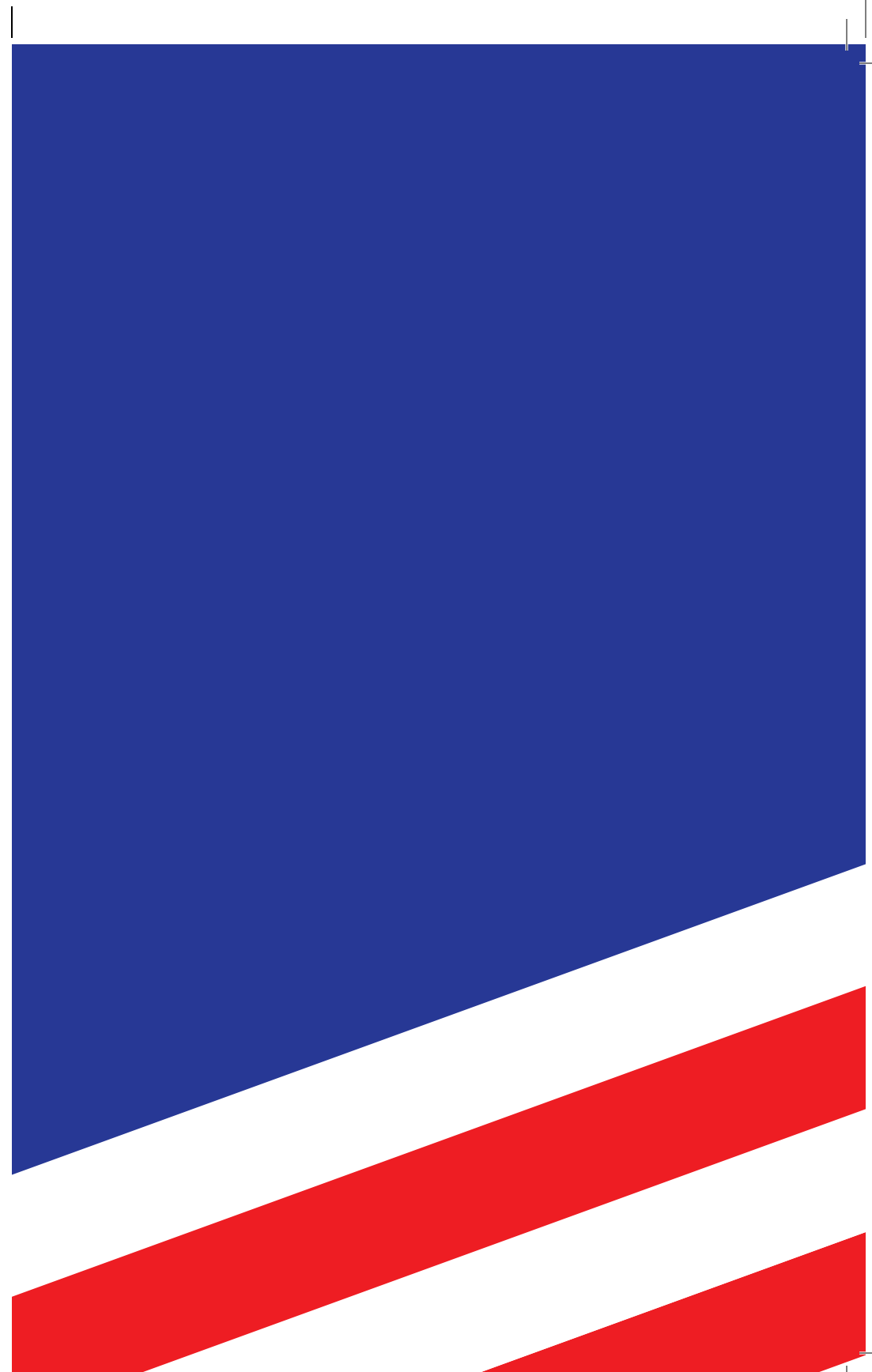
Emotionally, freedom evokes pride and gratitude for the opportunities I've been given, as well as a sense of duty to uplift others. It challenges me to think about my role in shaping a world where freedom is accessible to all. For me, freedom is not just about living without barriers but about empowering others to overcome their own challenges and embrace their identities.

Ultimately, freedom is personal, communal, and transformative. It is the ability to dream without limits, to speak without fear, and to live authentically. As a hijabi girl, freedom means embracing my identity with pride and using my voice to advocate for change. It is about celebrating diversity, fostering understanding, and working toward a future where everyone can thrive.

**MALAK M.**

*Honorable Mention - High School*

Grade 11 // Hopewell High School, Hopewell



**MOLLY M.***Honorable Mention - Elementary School*Title of Work: *Freedom to Me*

Grade 3 // Hilton Elementary, Scott County

**Artist Statement**

Freedom means I am able to worship as I please, I am able to celebrate holidays the way I want, and one day participate in elections.

**The Choice for Liberty**

In the words of the great General and President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “the history of free men is never really written by chance but by choice—their choice!” And almost two-hundred and fifty years ago, on one warm, sunny July day, the fifty-six men of the Second Continental Congress determined their own path, to form a free and independent nation. Free from tyranny and oppression. Free from injustice and maltreatment. A nation of the people, for the people, and by the people. While Noah Webster’s 1828 “An American Dictionary of the English Language” defines freedom as “a state of exemption from the power or control of another,” it certainly means so much more. Freedom is individuality, opportunity, and of course, sacrifice.

From Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* to Fleetwood Mac’s “Go Your Own Way,” America has always been about charting new paths. Even in the beginning, from the Pilgrims in Plymouth to the debtors in Georgia, individualism was always an ambition. For those at Jamestown in 1607, they crossed the treacherous Atlantic and survived the Starving Times, yes for economic advancement, but also for a sense of self-sufficiency. And naturally, this course of independent thinking led to the emergence of the United States. Our Constitution enshrines our individual rights and guarantees the freedom to determine our own direction, our own thoughts, and our own values. Furthermore, liberty is more than just speech, its independence as a human being. With the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, the nation was divided in two. Throughout the years of the war, there were countless battles, resulting in many victories and losses on each side. But none is arguably more important than the Union’s victory at Antietam.

As with this victory, came the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, a document that ensured freedom for all enslaved peoples in states recaptured by the North. This act and the following Reconstruction



Amendments allowed for greater individual freedom and for African Americans in the south to be finally “free at last”, although there was still much injustice until a century later in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Due to the efforts of those who campaigned for self-dependence, freedom is something much more easily appreciated.

Not only is liberty present as individualism but also in America’s promise for opportunity. Freedom is the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to love. George Washington Carver reminds us that the pursuit of knowledge is “the key that unlocks the golden door of freedom,” something that is proven through Carver’s struggles. Albeit being born into slavery, he was able to receive a basic education and worked to become the notable scientist he is known as today. For myself, education is a major factor in my life. For whatever I do in this world, there is no doubt that my education will not be the reason for it. Additionally, freedom is the opportunity for those looking for a better life to come to this land. Since the dawn of this country, millions have flocked to America to work, to love, and raise their families. From potato famines to invasions, America has been seen as a refuge. The opportunities available in this nation are unmatched and certainly something to be celebrated. In all aspects, whether work, education, or possibly something else, those in America are at liberty to choose who they want to be, which is quite extraordinary.

Finally, there can be no freedom without sacrifice, after all, as A. Philip Randolph states so truly that “Freedom is never granted: It is won.” Just as opportunity and the rights of the individual has been present in American history, so is sacrifice. Freedom can be seen in the bravery of those at Bunker Hill in Boston; men determined to fight in defense of their new country. Men who then died in their endeavors. It can too be seen on top of Mount Suribachi as six U.S. Marines, while in defense of the free world from the oppressive nature of fascism, planted the flag of the United States. Of the

six, three lost their lives, among some 7,000 while on Iwo Jima. Similarly, this sacrifice can be measured in the lives of the emergency personnel who were lost on 9/11 while helping others to safety. It can be seen in those who responded after the attacks, those like my dad, who flew fighter missions over Afghanistan and those who served on the ground. It is crucial to acknowledge that we live in the land of the free, because of the brave. Those who served and continue to serve others with no expectation of anything in return are the real reason for our freedoms.

So therefore, in my eyes, liberty encompasses the ideals of freedom of self, freedom of choice, and the underlying loss necessary for its preservation. Despite whatever hardships this country has faced in these past centuries, through every moment, prosperous or not, these ideals still hold true. America is a land dedicated to the conservation of independence. As spoken quite perfectly by President John Quincy Adams, “her glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of mind. She has a spear and a shield; but the motto upon her shield is Freedom, Independence, Peace.”

**DANIEL N.**  
*Region 2 Finalist*

Grade 11 // Tabb High School, York County

## Stars

The flag  
it silently caterwauls  
It somehow swiftly blows  
Shattered hopes to the whispering wind

It tells of a child torn from their home  
Of war  
But also of freedom  
Of hope

Those stars  
Those stars  
They glisten

The same stars that are in the sky  
are imprinted onto a piece of freedom

Lingering there  
Waiting  
For new light  
New hope  
A new day

The old songs are waking

### MARA O.

*Top Honors - Elementary School* ★

Grade 4 // Powhatan School, Boyce



### AVELIA P.

*Region 3 Finalist*

Grade 7 // Thomas Hunter Middle School, Mathews County

### Artist Statement

I was inspired to make this painting by the ferocity of the United States patriotism. The sharp talons show how strongly America's citizens would protect our country. The bayonet was inspired by the American Revolution; a war that molded our Constitution.

## The Power of Freedom

Every day at school, at home or in public, I have the right to talk to my friends and family freely without fear. I have the right to debate burning questions such as if morality is objective or subjective, or if individuals have the rights to disobey laws they perceive as unjust. Though I do have the right to discuss anything, others have every right to challenge my opinions especially if they are perceivably controversial. They can refute my claims—but they cannot silence me. The ability to express oneself without fear is something I consider to be a fundamental to freedom. To me, freedom is being able to march in protests, to stand up to what one believes in, and engage in any open conversations without fear of persecution. With this, The United States of America is the epitome of freedom. In the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the five key freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly and petition of the government are engraved in society. These rights are core to a functioning democracy, and protect peoples abilities to speak up, stay informed and do what one believes in without having to conform to a specific standard. I think these rights have been demonstrated throughout United States history, which I think is exercised in the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement specifically encompasses the freedom of speech, assembly and petition in its influential development, which are all what I consider freedom to hold.

The Civil Rights movement was essentially a movement that occurred after the passing of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendment. It formulated after there were still discrepancies in the equality of individuals in terms of Jim Crow Laws (Melvin, 2024). There was segregation in schools, facilities and senseless violence towards African Americans. Therefore, this unfairness led to individuals withholding their cognitive historical consciousness leading to a stronger collective movement. Protesters speaking out against

the prevalent racism, utilized their constitutional rights to speak out and organize in a peaceful manner. There were sit-ins, marches and boycotts with people demanding equality. Activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech became rallying cries for both hope and equality. Dr. King was able to exercise the rights of freedom of speech (Stanford University, 1963). This eventually led to a broader movement of freedom of assembly. Dr. King served as a catalyst for the development of peaceful marches and boycotts—which were all protected by the First Amendment.

Events such as the Selma Marches were created amongst African Americans in Alabama to demand the rights for voting privileges. There were three main marches, each having the same goal. The second march was led by Rev. Dr. MLK. It was known as "Turnaround Tuesday" (National Archives, 2020). Twice as many people of all backgrounds chose to exercise their freedoms to combat the discrepancies of the flawed voting system. Though the group was peaceful in demonstrating the need for equality, they were met with resistance. This was seen on "Bloody Sunday" (National Archives, 2020). Though there were many obstacles to fully hold their constitutional rights, the protesters persisted. Thus, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed to end racial discrimination in voting. The march stands as a testament of power of people exercising their rights of assembly, speech and petition. Protesters assembled peacefully in the face of adversity, actively speaking their petitions to their oppressors for a more just system. Thus, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, equality was forever preserved in the United States.



I believe the important success of the admirable Civil Rights movement, towards the growth of the United States would have been much harder without the rights of our Constitution. Though there was oppressive nature, the First Amendment enabled for many voices to flourish and be heard. Without this freedom, I think society would lack the power to evolve and correct its wrongs. It means a lot to me that if I feel like something is unjust like the protesters of the Civil Rights movement did, I can speak out against it and expect some forms of change. For this reason, I think freedom is more than a right—it is a necessity.

The necessity of freedom, which was crucial to the development of the Civil Rights movement, was effectively curated within the constitution to establish a stronger national government. This was seen after the evident weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation (National Archives, 2023). This eventually lead to the need of a refined national government. This was the Constitution. It essentially refined peoples rights, creating a functional system for residents of the United States to flourish. This also softened ties between the British and the United States, allowing there to be solidified diplomatic negotiation. This created an environment for America to focus internally, serving as a pedestal for movements like the Civil Rights movement to gain momentum in exercising the First Amendment.

With this, I think the Constitution is an influential document that has allowed for freedom to flourish. I stand by the fact that freedom is more than a privilege, it is the foundation upon which individuals are able to shape their identities and fight for justice. The Civil Rights movement serves as a reminder that freedom must be continuously upheld. It remains important that the principles enshrined in the Constitution remain essential for people to have the right to be heard. Freedom is able to evolve from what was stated in the First Amendment—evolving through courage, activism and

perseverance. This was seen in the Civil Rights movement, as people fought for justice without their sacrifices being in vain. Overall, what freedom means to me is not just having rights, but exercising them without having to worry about persecution for standing up for what one thinks is right without being silenced.

**SHANEEKA S.**  
*Region 6 Finalist*

Grade 11 // Blacksburg High School, Montgomery County

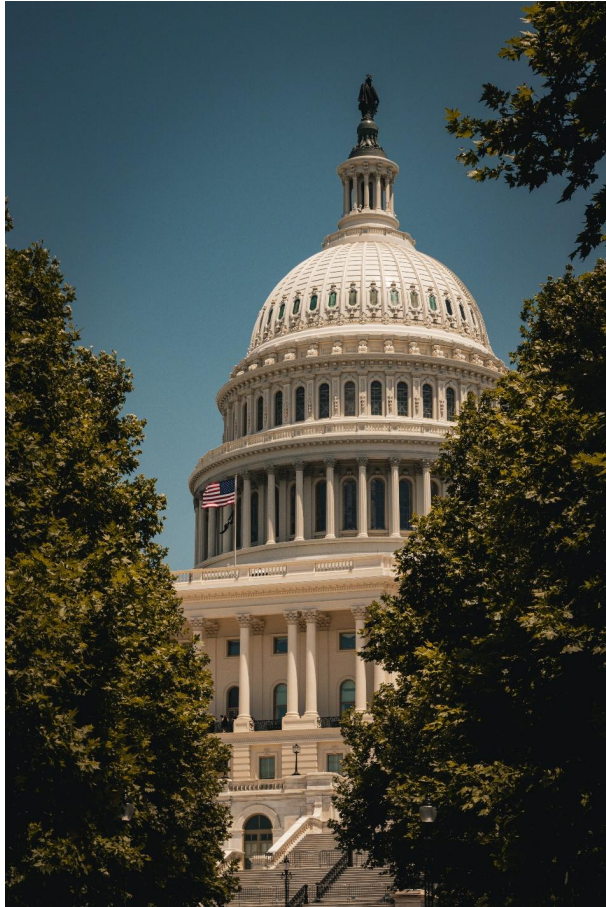
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*Photo by: Conner S.*

## The Foundation of Freedom

Taken on a warm summer day in Washington, D.C., during my time at the National Youth Leadership Forum for Law & CSI, this photo shows the historic west facade of the United States Capitol Building. Flanked by tall, green trees, the photograph features the south steps, a moving site that witnesses not only the ideals of democracy but also some of its most profound historical events. Behind it rises the Capitol's massive dome with the Statue of Freedom atop, surrounded by a brilliant blue sky, an emblem of the unconquered spirit of governance and justice.

To me, Freedom is more than just a word, it's a societal promise, a lifelong pursuit, and a responsibility shared by all who live in its light. To me, Freedom means the ability to speak my mind, to gather in support of or against something, to descent on the acts of those in power who use it to exploit, and to shape the future of this great nation without the fear of subjugation. For me, it means having the courage to be myself in a world where no two people see it the same way. Freedom requires us to realize that it is not just given, but instead requires that every citizen rise in support of common ideals and to fight the good fight.

Growing up American, I've often been told that we are the "land of the free," in fact it's even in our national anthem. During Senator Cory Booker's 25-hour long speech on the Senate floor, Virginia Senator Tim Kaine raised in support and stated "Some of our national symbols have some unusual aspects to them that point to this [American] experiment. We have a national anthem that ends with a question. Not an assertion, not a declaration, but whether the flag will still stand over the home of the free and the land of the brave question mark." Senator Kaine reminds us that freedom isn't a given, it's something that requires vigilance, commitment, and the courage to defend it, just as Patrick Henry called for in his immortal words: "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

Every single right I now enjoy, whether my right to learn, to worship or not, to peacefully protest, or to express my opinions, has been fought and won by generations before me. It's easy to forget that many people around the world still live without these rights, and that even in our own country, freedom has not always been equally shared.

Freedom is also about hope. Hope for what is and will be. It's the belief that change is possible and that a better future may be built. As a young person, I may not have all the answers, but I know this: my freedom is a call to action.

It invites me to be an active member in my community, to fight for what is just, and to engage in helping make the world more inclusive.

Though the road ahead will be strewn with challenges, it will also be one of great opportunities for growth. Our country's future depends on our ability to unite, learn from the past, and chart a course grounded on the values the founding fathers once held so dear. Taking on our own responsibility as stewards of freedom will help us to guarantee the legacy we leave behind is one of hope and resolve. Only together, we can control the destiny of our country and write America's next chapter in a way that we can all be proud of.

To me, freedom isn't a place, it's a process. One that started many years before I was born, and one that I now continue. It's not only about what I'm free to do, but about what I'm free to be. And within that freedom is the ability to make a difference.

### **CONNOR S.**

*Top Honors - High School* ★

Grade 11 // Gar-Field Senior High School, Prince William County

## **The Freedom to do Good**

Throughout every generation and culture, there has always been a yearning for freedom. Whether it is the Israelites calling for release from bondage or the constituents of the Roman Republic willing to kill Julius Caesar, the demand and desire to preserve freedom is found in all of humanity. Yet, what is the extent and virtue of this precious heirloom we search for? Does it simply mean freedom to do as we please? By that line of thinking, laws would inherently be contradictory to freedom. Rather, the purpose and meaning of freedom tie back to the purpose of humanity as a whole. It is the freedom to choose and do good.

This definition can be found in several documents that America holds very dear. Thomas Paine advocated for religious freedom so every man could best serve God as he felt his conscience led him. There is an implicit assumption that choices were available, so the individual could do what he most felt was right. This very idea is what also lies behind laws. In the first lines of the United States' Constitution, it is said the United States was being formed to ensure justice, domestic tranquility, and the continuation of liberty throughout generations. Laws are in place to ensure evil does not come to the innocent. Therefore, the freedom which civilization is striving for cannot simply be freedom to do as we please, for then justice would have no place. Rather, it is freedom to do what is right.

The opportunity to choose right and reject wrong is why humankind has free will in the first place. As Jesus Christ taught, the first and second greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. These principles are what all of morality hinges on. If man were simply forced to do what is good for now and always, there would be no heart or love behind it. Men and women would be little more akin to automatons; they would be set to follow out directives without the possibility of another



course. The virtue of humans doing right comes when there is a choice to do so. For choice is when selflessness, compassion, and love exist.

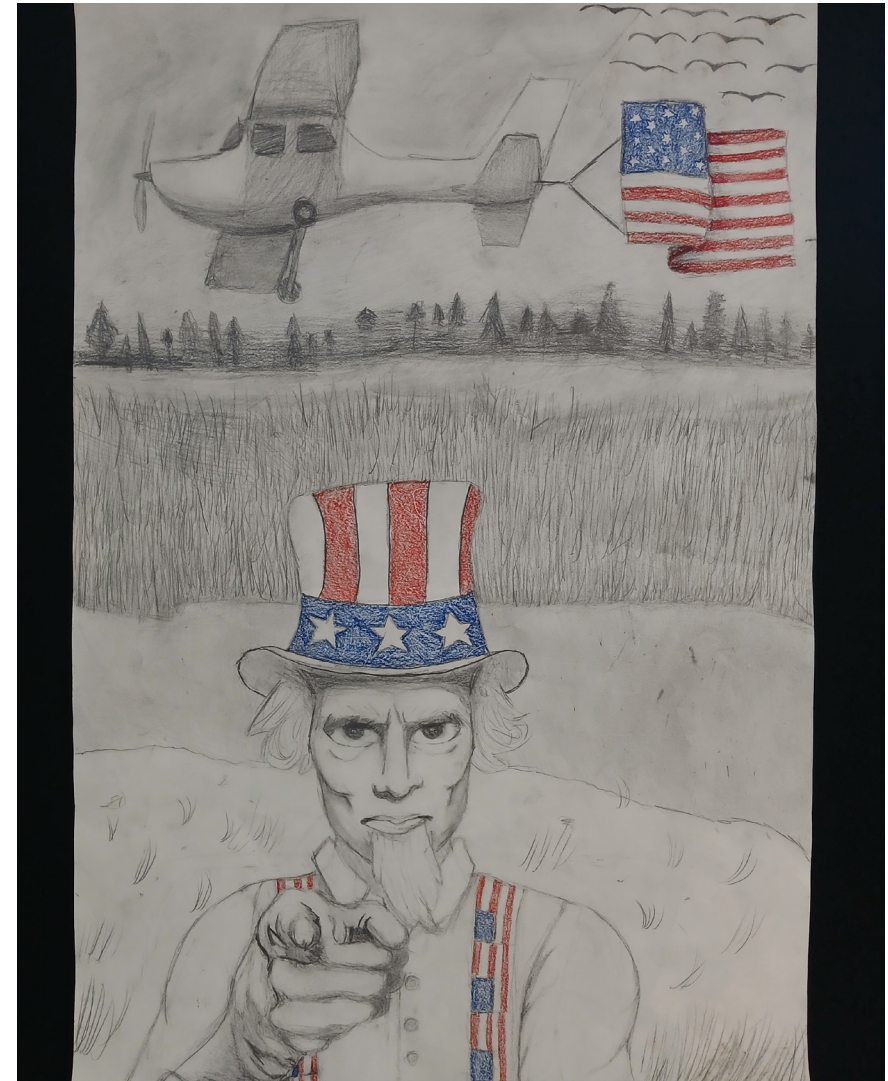
The disappointing cost of this choice means there also remains the opportunity to reject what is right and good for our neighbors. Though freedom exists for mankind to do good as best as they see how, some take this freedom as an opportunity to act selfishly. There are those who never give to charity, who do not even provide for their family. While this tragic reality of shirking the gift and responsibility of mankind lingers through society, there are others who actively hurt and wrong their fellow men. These individuals steal, slander, and kill to improve their own lives. It is this group that the law of man stands against. The law is to stop those who do evil from hindering the citizens who act rightly. Though people use freedom as an excuse to do evil, the original use of freedom still shines strong.

Freedom is the glorious prize all seek. However, the purpose and goodness of freedom is not to allow everyone to do as they please. It is to choose to do good as the individual's conscience instructs them. For good acts without choice is as virtuous as a rock being forced down because of gravity's pull. Though some reject good and choose evil, freedom still stands as a desirable fountain from which all peoples should be able to drink. Freedom is the path humankind walks to achieve what is noble.

### **JOSH S.**

*Honorable Mention - High School*

Grade 12 // Halifax County High School, Halifax County



### **KATE S.**

*Honorable Mention - Middle School*

Grade 7 // Thomas Hunter Middle School, Mathews County

### **Artist Statement**

My work references the scenery of Mathews County and its marshy landscape. My drawing reflects the Patriotism of a rural community.



**JOANNA Z.**

*Top Honors - Middle School* ★

Title of Work: *General Lafayette*

Grade 8 // St. Anne's Belfield School, Charlottesville

### Artist Statement

When I think of the word “freedom,” I think of the Marquis de Lafayette. He was an abolitionist, a feminist, and a lifelong fighter for liberty and equality. His ideas were very ahead of their time. His story is very inspiring to me. He did a lot for this country and I wanted to show it in this painting.

He befriended many presidents along the way and attempted to change their views about things like slavery. He befriended James Armistead Lafayette and saw the potential in him that many don't. He fought for us even when he absolutely did not have to as a Frenchman.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of his return to the United States in 1824 and 1825. I couldn't help but think, if Lafayette was here today, would he have liked what he's seeing? He had high hopes and great expectations for this country. Would he think 250 years was finally enough for everything he believed this nation can do, to become true?







## AMERICA. MADE IN VIRGINIA.

From the first English settlement at Jamestown  
To the surrender of the British at Yorktown  
From "give me liberty, or give me death!"  
To "all men are created equal"  
From Washington and Jefferson  
To Madison and Mason  
From Powhatan and Pocahontas  
To James Armistead Lafayette and Gowan Pamphlet  
From the ideas that inspired it  
To the battlefields that decided it  
There is simply no America without it  
And no better time than now to reconnect with your country  
In the place that made it possible

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